

Joyful Parenting

Joyful Parenting

FREYA DAWSON

≡ **The Five Skills** ≡
to take your family from
Conflict to Connection



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*To my darling J and L.
May you always know that you are loved.*

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Introduction

PARENTING DOES NOT HAVE to be a struggle and it does not have to be stressful. It can be a thoroughly joyful experience arising out of a harmonious and intimate relationship between parent and child. Many people desire this peace and harmony with their children and most parents have experienced glimpses of it. Some have found their way to a relationship centred in the vibrant, joyful flow of life. It is my delight in finding this joyful flow with my own children that motivated me to write this book.

This does not mean that there aren't challenges. No-one would bother reading parenting books if it was all plain sailing and there was nothing new to learn. This book will show you how the problems that arise in your relationship with your children can become opportunities. Problems provide a gateway to the transformation

of relationships and the discovery of deep reserves of peace and wisdom within ourselves. This book will help you discover relationships rich in kindness, connection and trust. It will show you how to unlearn unhelpful beliefs and habits of communication and master new ones. It will give you the skills to embrace any challenge that parenting can throw at you knowing that a solution will be found that benefits everyone.

I am not making these claims as a parenting expert with formal qualifications in this field. I am writing from the personal experience of my own journey with my children, husband, family and friends. I am not promoting any theory, philosophy or belief system. I am not painting a fantasy picture or describing how I think parenting should be. This book is all about practical skills which you can explore and test and make your own. Each of the skills presented here can guide you closer to a relationship with your children that you truly desire.

I have spent the last dozen years researching practical techniques to transform parenting from the difficult, drama-filled and hugely stressful role that it was for me in the early years into something much more peaceful and fun. I went through hard times when I felt very much out of my depth. I searched for guidance, inspiration and skills in books about parenting, communication, self-help and spiritual teachings. I was attracted to ideas and practices that were fresh, vital and easy to apply. I wasn't looking for an expert to tell me what to do or what to believe. My aim was to get past belief systems and cultural conditioning and discover a natural and spontaneous way of being with my children. I wanted to explore

and investigate for myself what skills and ideas would bring the most harmony and peace to our family. Over the years I have found some really amazing writers and teachers. I have applied, practised and adapted the ideas and skills that they shared. I have also received wonderful gifts of help and wisdom from friends, family and the children around me. I want to pass on all these gifts through this book.

At the heart of this book are two simple questions:

Do you want more peace and joy in your family life?

Are you willing to change some of the ways you think about and communicate with your children to find this peace and joy?

If your answer to these questions is *Yes* then this book can help. The information presented here can be adapted to suit parents and children of any age, personality, temperament or ability. Don't be discouraged by thinking that your child or your family has special problems or particularly difficult ones. There is something here to help everyone with the willingness to try something new. You can dip in and take a little bit of inspiration or you can go for a fully fledged transformation. If you are already well on the way to finding peace and harmony in family life this book will offer you inspiration to travel even further.

At the heart of my parenting journey is the intention to choose peace as my number one goal. This is more important to me than what other people think of us or how much my children achieve. It is out of peace that joyfulness and freedom flow into our lives.

It is the basis for the closeness I have with my children and the delight that they bring into my life. To discover these wonderful benefits I have explored within myself to find out what peace actually feels like. I have engaged in a deep investigation of what a truly peaceful and joyful family life is like. It is certainly not how I initially assumed it might be. Peace is something we all have within us but it will be expressed differently in each family. I imagine an infinite variety of unique family blends or 'flavours' of peace. My relationship with my children evolves and shifts all the time, so it can't be pinned down or easily described. I can clarify a few things though. I do not mean peace in the peace-and-quiet sense. The atmosphere in our home is often loud and boisterous. I do not impose an idea of quiet, polite or even calm peace on my children. When I say that I choose peace as my goal, I mean that I aim for a lack of stress, worry and complaint on my part and a love of the way things are. I find peace moment by moment as an inner calm and acceptance. This peace is always available within me. I still lose sight of it from time to time but I know how to reconnect with it.

When I talk about parenting as being joyful I do not mean this in a happy-all-the-time sense. Everyone in our family still has their emotional ups and downs, including me. Joy has a deeper, quieter quality than happiness. It is more of a constant underlying hum or vibration. It is intimately connected with the experience of aliveness, vitality and gratitude. The more strongly I am connected to these qualities the less I am affected by negative emotions when they arise. When I get upset with my children it passes quickly. We get back to harmony easily.

The freedom I have discovered through parenting is not solely a freedom to do what I want, although that is part of it. It is mostly a freedom of the mind; freedom from the burden of constant stressful thoughts, painful feelings and family conflict. It is also the freedom to be true to myself and to follow what brings me joy. I explore what I really want in a situation rather than simply follow my initial impulse or the voice in my head telling me what I should do. It is about listening to inner guidance and aligning myself with the flow of life rather than struggling against it. As I embody this freedom in my life I can also extend it to my children. Freedom has no controlling agenda. It does not respect my plans for the future or the expectations I have of my children. It is experienced moment by moment.

The journey begins

I received the most extraordinary gifts when my children were born. These two people that came through me have beamed out love, beauty and aliveness every day of their lives. They brought such delight into my life. And living with and caring for them also challenged me to an extent that I was totally unprepared for.

When my first child was born I was blissfully ignorant and unprepared. I had not reflected on what parenting would be like and I had no adult experience with young children. I hadn't considered anything beyond giving birth and having some baby clothes and nappies on hand. In truth, I don't think information or preparation would have really helped me. It was the difficult emotions, reactions and verbal outbursts that parenting stirred up in me that proved to be my biggest challenge, not the practical task of looking after a baby.

As my child grew I discovered that lurking in my mind was a large bundle of beliefs about children and parenting. These beliefs were stashed away in the back of my mind, just waiting to pop up when the moment was right. They were formed out of my own childhood experiences as well as scraps of information that I had absorbed from my friends, extended family and the cultural soup in which I was stewing every day. I didn't realise it, but I had already picked up a full job description of what a good parent should and shouldn't do. It was a job description that was impossible to fulfil and yet I unconsciously committed myself to trying to be that fantasy parent. My beliefs about how children should and shouldn't behave also started to emerge from the depths of my unconscious mind. I had a soft-focus fantasy concept of a good child hiding in there. I had no idea how strong my expectations of my child were until he unwittingly failed to meet them.

In the early years with my first son, many of my beliefs brought stress into my life. I was plagued by thoughts such as *He shouldn't be crying this much*, *He shouldn't hit other children*, *He shouldn't snatch that toy*, and *He should settle into preschool so I can go back to work!* When these thoughts conflicted with the reality of life I started to struggle with my child to try to get things to be the way I thought they should be. My attempts to teach and guide him didn't bring the results I was looking for. This brought up even more stressful thoughts. I was haunted by the belief that parents are responsible for their children's behaviour. If my child did something that others found unacceptable I was wracked with stress and anxiety. I desperately wanted to make that behaviour go away.

My attempts to change my son and control his behaviour not only didn't work, they made things worse. I knew deep down that my efforts to train and control him were going against the grain for me. I was horrified by some of the words that came out of my mouth and dismayed at the conflict between us. On a good day I could be kind and gentle but under pressure the harsh words just came spilling out. I started yelling at my child and exaggerating dangers to stop him taking risks. I heard myself threaten, ridicule and lecture him. Although I judged myself very harshly at the time, I know now that my reactions were all innocent. I was following the script embedded in my mind and believing it. My words and actions flowed inevitably from what I was thinking and believing. I couldn't help it. I didn't know what else to do or say. I felt trapped.

When I had another child the stakes got higher. I experienced more happiness but also more intensely stressful feelings. Being with two young children was an emotional roller-coaster for me. There were moments of great fun and delight with my husband and children. There were wonderful new friends and some lovely shared moments with extended family. And I was often trailed and enveloped by a cloud of stress and anxiety. Parenting brought struggle and conflict into my life with surprising frequency and intensity. Life was exhausting and I often woke up dreading what the day would bring.

I discovered that being in relationships with my young children brought up a surge of strong feelings about my own life and childhood. Old, unresolved emotions and stressful memories bubbled up. I felt fear, anger and grief more intensely. I became reactive

and judgmental in a whole new way, not just towards my children but to others in my life as well. I was far from peaceful and relaxed although I did my best to hide this from myself and the world. There were physical symptoms of stress too: I came out in rashes, I got persistent headaches and all sorts of aches in my body. I was confused and bewildered by it all and very much out of my depth. I committed myself to finding a way to live in peace and joy with my children. Little of the mainstream parenting advice seemed at all helpful to me. I set out to find an approach to parenting that would take me beyond just coping with or managing my problems. What I was looking for was to dissolve the problems altogether.

About this book

This book offers no advice about how to bring up happy, successful, or well behaved children. It does not focus on how children will ultimately turn out. It focusses primarily on the experience of parents. It is about what is going on in our minds and how this influences how we relate to our children and ourselves. The way we relate to our children will affect them, but it is not the effect on children that I wish to emphasise here. I have seen wonderful changes in my children as I have gradually shed my old ways of communicating, my anxieties and my attempts to control them but the journey has been mostly for my benefit. Finding peace within myself is obviously for my benefit. It is also my way of leading my children. I aim to be a peace-worker in the family: a person who models what peace looks like. Meanwhile, my children continue to face the inevitable delights and challenges involved in growing up.

This book is an invitation to explore within yourself and to discover a way of relating to your children that reflects your own true nature and heartfelt intuition. It provides practical guidance on how to find peace no matter what your children are doing and what problems you face. I will share simple practices to raise your self-awareness and connect you with the calm, relaxed energy within yourself. All of the skills and practices presented here can fit easily into the full days of any parent. They will help you to dissolve the old beliefs and ways of communicating that create stress and conflict in your life. As your mind becomes clearer, insights and intuition that were once blocked will start shining through. Let yourself be guided by this knowing. Take from this book whatever resonates for you and leave the rest.

Each problem I encountered in my parenting journey brought its own gifts; new ways of thinking, new skills, more understanding and greater trust. I look forward to future challenges, no matter how confronting they may initially appear to be, knowing that we can find the way through to a solution. Each of the five skills in this book provides a method of resolving problems between you and your child (or children) and dissolving stress and struggle in your family life. I recommend that you work through each skill in sequence and give yourself some time to practise each one before you move on to the next. The later skills build on the earlier ones.

Skill 1 is a tool for helping your children with their problems. I call it *Listening in Presence*. I explore what it means to be fully present with your children and share tips for noticing and dissolving your old habits of reacting. Instead of reacting and communicating out

of habit you will learn new ways of actively and respectfully listening to your children that help to restore peace.

Skill 2 is called *Question your Thinking*. I describe how to use self-inquiry to open your mind about issues that have been troubling you and to dissolve your stress and worries about your children. I have used this tool to find peace and guidance within myself. I share insights into common beliefs about children and parenting that are the root of much stress.

Skill 3 is a method to help you to ask for help from your children to get what you want. I call it *Speaking from the Heart*. It is about owning your problems and asking your children for help in a peaceful, honest and direct way.

Skill 4 is called *Creative Problem Solving*. It incorporates each of the three skills described above and combines them with a problem solving technique. It provides a method for dealing with situations where you are stuck in conflict with your child. This skill takes the power struggle out of parenting. It will also take you deeper into the art of asking for and receiving intuitive guidance.

Skill 5 is called *Play Time*. It is an invitation to play with your children and to notice and respect the importance of play in their lives. It describes how play can be a powerful tool for strengthening your relationship with your child as well as healing emotional wounds.



SKILL ONE

Listening in Presence

SKILL ONE

Listening in Presence

How to help with your child's problems

BEING GENUINELY HELPFUL TO my children when they have a problem is something that brings joy into my life. I want to give help that is calm, supportive and that increases my child's confidence in their own ability to help themselves. This did not come naturally for me, at least not to the extent that I would have liked. It was a skill that required a lot of practice as well as much unlearning of old, unhelpful habits. I often fell into the trap of trying to fix a problem when this was not requested or helpful. My child would react to my intrusion and I would become part of the problem. I often assumed that I knew best and waded in with advice or instructions. My advice was occasionally helpful in the short-term but it also got in the way of my child's emerging ability to help themselves. There

were also many times when my child's expression of their problem triggered painful feelings in me. I would unwittingly join them in their suffering rather than remain peaceful and fully available to help. It was challenge for me to find a way to help my children in a respectful and non-reactive way.

It was not difficult for me to listen calmly when my children were feeling sad, disappointed or mildly frustrated. If they were crying and wanting a hug I was usually able to help. I had more difficulty with situations where one of my children was experiencing intense emotions such as anger, fear and intense frustration. I also had difficulty when they were acting out their feelings through hitting, scratching or snatching rather than expressing them in words or tears.

Being genuinely helpful required a shift in my perception of my children's behaviour and their expression of emotion. I came to realise that what I sometimes judged as tantrums, rude words and unacceptable behaviour were actually cries for help. Young children often have difficulty in expressing their problems in a way that parents can easily understand. They may not have the skills to express clearly what they want or what is causing them distress. Their calls for help are sometimes communicated through screaming, aggressive behaviour or even in hate-filled verbal outbursts. I found myself challenged to find a peaceful way of helping my children in this type of situation.

It can be genuinely difficult for parents to work out what is causing their child's distress. Sometimes finding an immediate cause can help solve a problem quickly. At other times the cause may remain

unknown. I have learned that identifying the cause of a problem is not necessary in order for a solution to emerge. It can be an unhelpful distraction. Sometimes a child's painful feelings may be related more to events in the past than the present situation. Their distress may be triggered by something seemingly minor in the present like not cutting their toast exactly the way they like it, or seeing a dog on the other side of the park. This trigger may be followed by a major upset that seems out of all proportion to the event that started it. The event may have triggered a memory of painful, unresolved emotion from the past. If I am aware of this possibility I can listen respectfully rather than try and downplay or negate my child's reaction. I may never work out what the root of the problem is. I have learned that this doesn't matter when I am able to support my child through my ability to listen.

There are many situations where simply listening, rather than trying to fix, soothe or work out what my child wants is the best way that I can help. I witnessed a situation like this on a recent inter-city train journey. A young boy of about one year old got on the train with his mother. Once the train was underway he had a drink from his bottle and fell asleep in his pram for about 15 minutes. When he woke up he started to cry. His mother appeared anxious about this right from the start. She held him on her lap and tried to comfort him but he kept crying. She tried to distract him. She tried repeatedly to get him to take his bottle and go back to sleep. She tried to soothe him with gentle words and reassurance but he kept crying. She jiggled and patted him, put him down and picked him up again. He couldn't say what was wrong. His mother couldn't work out what she could do to help. She got increasingly

anxious about what the other people in the carriage were thinking of her and the noise her son was making. Her distress was palpable. Both the child and the mother remained distressed until they got off the train about an hour later.

I could certainly relate to the distress that this mother experienced. I have listened to my child screaming in public many times. The public nature of their distress and my worry about what others were thinking about me was usually the main challenge. This is a situation where calm, sustained, attentive listening is immensely useful. Over time I learned that if I was able to listen calmly in these circumstances that my child stopped crying a lot more quickly. If I was able to notice my fear of being judged by others I could also choose to ignore it for the moment. I would imagine an invisible bubble shielding my child and I from others' gaze and hearing. I learned to focus my attention on listening to my child rather than trying to get them to stop crying. When I did this I experienced the situation very differently. I was not suffering along with my child. This was such a breakthrough for me.

The challenge of finding the best way of helping my children with their problems led me to the skill of Listening in Presence. This is the skill of listening calmly and respectfully to my child without reacting to their problem. I don't try and analyse the problem or leap in with advice. I give my child my attention and at the same time I am aware of the thoughts and emotions that the situation may be triggering within me. This isn't as difficult as it may sound, but it does take some practice. This skill can

transform something as ordinary as responding to a screaming one-year old on a train into a special moment of intimacy and caring.

I have come to understand that the most important ingredient in providing genuine help to my children is my own wellbeing. If I am not peaceful and happy I cannot extend this to my children. I cannot give what I don't have. My wellbeing is intimately connected to awareness and presence.

What is presence and how can it help?

I had never heard of presence when my children were very young and my life reflected this. I lived mostly in my head and was pulled into the swirl of stressful thoughts, emotional reactions and regular exhaustion that came with raising young children. I was trying hard to be a “good mother” and was lost in all the fussing, coaxing and worrying that accompanied this. The wake-up call from this way of life came from one of my children. It came in the form of intense emotional outbursts. Waves of despair, terror and rage came crashing through my walls of reserve and control. I was totally caught up in the tumult. How could it be otherwise when this was such an intimate and precious relationship for me?

I tried really hard to respond calmly to my child's intense emotions but I just couldn't do it. Witnessing my child's suffering stirred up strong reactions in me. I found myself reacting with fear, anger and frustration. I felt intensely uncomfortable. I wanted desperately to help him but I felt that I was failing. I couldn't work out what was causing such intense emotion and it seemed out of all proportion to what was happening in our daily life. I felt overwhelmed and desperate and I tried to mask this behind a

facade of control and composure. At some level I blamed my child for my distress and made him the problem. I blamed him for disturbing my life with his emotional drama. I also got angry and frustrated at myself for not being able to calm or stop these outbursts. I was scared of the drama escalating and becoming even more difficult to deal with.

My reactions fuelled the fire of my child's distress and made the outbursts of suffering worse rather than better. The intensity and frequency of major upsets increased. I tried everything I knew and it did not help. I had to admit to myself that I needed help. I had no idea where it would come from or what form it might take. The help that eventually appeared was an invitation into presence.

The invitation arrived one day when I was on an errand to the chemist. It was a day when my husband was at home so I didn't have my children with me. I took the opportunity of a few moments of free time to drop into a secondhand bookshop just to have a quick browse. As I looked around the shop a book on the far wall caught my attention. I was irresistibly drawn to it. It was Eckhart Tolle's book *A New Earth*. It practically jumped of the shelf and into my hands. It was just what I needed.

Eckhart Tolle's words helped me to connect with the peace and stillness that is always within me. He invited me to recognise the consciousness that is behind my thoughts. This consciousness witnesses and observes my thoughts and emotions. I practised turning my attention inwards towards this aware consciousness and letting go of my thoughts for short periods of time. I noticed that when I am not thinking *I still exist*. I realised that I am not

my thoughts. They are ephemeral creations of my mind. I exist as awareness before my thoughts, during my thoughts and after my thoughts have subsided.

As I recognised this awareness again and again my thoughts began to lose their power over me. I began to know my true self as the peaceful space between thoughts. This was a radical, wonderful, life-changing shift in perspective.

This observing-consciousness can be called presence. I experience presence as a state of calm, relaxed, alert awareness. It is a space of peace, stillness and also vibrant aliveness. Thoughts appear in this space but they do not dominate. I can notice my thoughts without being controlled by them. When I focus on presence I am not overwhelmed by a constant stream of worries or judgements about other people. I am not compulsively doing things, planning or fearing the future and I am not dwelling on the past. There is space between thoughts in which I experience quietness and joy. Helpful, creative thoughts have room to appear. I can choose to act on these thoughts or to remain still. It is a natural and spontaneous state of being.

Discovering the power of presence was a turning point in my parenting journey. Everything got easier. Not immediately, but gently and surely. Paradoxically, I discovered that I could readily access this inner calm in moments of great emotional intensity. It was at these times of my greatest need that the window into presence first opened for me. It was as if I had unlocked a new dimension inside myself with the simple intention to focus inwards and away from my thoughts. I could recognise presence and listen to my

child at the same time. Listening to my child's emotional outbursts gradually changed from a highly stressful experience into one that was peaceful and empowering for me. I found that I could listen to my child without reacting, even when his suffering was intense. I did not feel compelled to buy into the drama. Presence brought a quality to my listening that I had never known before. There was space where there hadn't been before. I discovered a deep well of peace and inspiration for wise, skilful action. I could respond in a way that diffused the energy of my children's suffering rather than fuelled it. This was an amazing change. As my experience of listening in presence to my child deepened the wild outbursts gradually disappeared. The drama of those years is now a distant memory.

How do I connect with presence?

You might have already recognised presence or you may have never heard of it before. Perhaps you remember moments when you were calm and relaxed and could observe your thoughts and feelings rather than be overwhelmed by them. If you have, then you have experienced presence. You might have a practice in your life that quietens your mind and brings you into presence. You might meditate, practise yoga, swim laps of the pool or create art. These can all be ways to connect with presence in daily life.

The key to recognising and experiencing presence is the intention that you bring to the practice rather than the practice itself. For a while I meditated with a desire to control my mind and get rid of my stressful thoughts. With my focus on control, rather than on the presence behind my thoughts, I found that it brought only temporary relief. After a while the suppressed stress came back just as strong.

I did not find lasting peace. When I practised yoga to get fit and relax it felt good but I did not tap into the deep calm and wisdom that presence provides. I was still focused too much on controlling and improving my body and mind rather than awareness. I found that no matter what I practised, if there was any trying or pushing myself involved then I was not aligned with presence.

I have learned to cultivate presence through simple daily practices that allow me to just *be*. I might turn my attention to one of the practices described below as I lie in bed in the morning, while walking on the beach or while having a cup of tea and watching my children play. The more often that I remember to recognise presence, the greater the benefits. It doesn't matter how long the practice lasts. It can be as little as a few seconds. The key is to repeat it often.

1. Direct the focus of your attention into the now

Eckhart Tolle gives these simple instructions for experiencing presence:

*Just become intensely conscious of the present moment. This is a deeply satisfying thing to do. In this way, you draw consciousness away from mind activity and create a gap of no-mind in which you are highly alert and aware but not thinking.*¹

You draw your attention onto what is happening right now in your life and away from thoughts of the past or future.

I have found that it helps if I choose an activity that I repeat a number of times a day and give it my fullest attention. This can be something simple such as washing my hands, eating a meal or doing the washing up. I use one of these events as a reminder to

experience presence. I focus on my senses; what I can see, hear, touch, taste and smell. Sometimes I focus on my breath. I aim to immerse myself fully in this experience of Now. I pay attention to the tiny details and take care in my actions. When I notice thoughts coming into my mind, I gently remind myself to focus on my senses. As I focus in this way, my mind quietsens, and I can experience the stillness and peace within.

2. Connect with your inner body

Are you aware of your inner body, of the field of energy within and around your physical body? Connecting with this inner body is a wonderful gateway into presence. You might like to try this exercise: close your eyes and take a few deep, relaxing breaths. Begin to shake your hands vigorously. Stop shaking and bring your attention to the sensations in your hands. Feel the energy and aliveness inside your hands. It might feel like a subtle tingling sensation. Now direct your attention to the whole of your body. Feel it from within. Can you feel this aliveness within your whole body? If you can, feel it in all parts of your body as a single field of energy. When you open your eyes can you keep your attention on this aliveness? This field of alive energy is not just within the body but surrounding it as well. Some people can see or feel the energy field that surrounds the body as the aura.

Holding attention on my inner body draws me out of my mind and reveals the space of calm, relaxed alertness that is always within. The simple choice to take my attention off my thoughts and to focus on that tingling, radiant aliveness within my body has become a profoundly powerful practice for me.

When I first began this practice I could only catch brief glimpses of inner aliveness, usually just in my legs or arms. I noticed it most easily when I went out for a walk in nature. I went for regular walks on the beach and in the forest, each time drawing my attention to my inner body. Gradually I could feel more of it and hold my attention there for longer. The experience was strongest when I walked in bare feet and could feel the earth or sea. Some people refer to this experience as grounding. Not only do I feel a strong recognition of presence but I also feel my inner energy field coming into alignment with the energy of nature.

Once I had the feel of this practice I found it easier to experience presence in other parts of my day. I found that I could focus attention on my inner body at the same time as I was listening to or talking with my children, doing the housework or dealing with a crisis. This focus on presence draws energy away from stressful thoughts and feelings and they begin to dissolve. The quiet joy and peace of presence became something that I yearned for. To experience myself as conscious energy, as vibrant aliveness has been a wondrous revelation. The more I give myself over to it, the more my experience of presence expands and deepens.

3. Become aware of what you are thinking and feeling

Another way to recognise presence is to practise turning your attention to what you are thinking, feeling and experiencing internally in a chosen moment. I simply ask myself *In this moment, what am I experiencing?* I may notice inner peace and joy. At other times I find stressful thoughts and painful feelings. I try not to judge what I find, just to notice and observe.

When I use this practice I sometimes notice that I am lost in worry or the urge to control my child or I am exhausted and yet pushing myself to do more. The act of turning my attention inwards and *observing* these thoughts and feelings brings me into presence. I experience myself as the conscious, aware observer. If I notice myself judging my thoughts and feelings I know that I have lost presence. I return to just noticing them.

Presence in children

Presence shines brightly in young children, although they are not aware of it. Their lightness of being has not yet been obscured by unresolved pain or limiting beliefs. They radiate aliveness, creativity, spontaneity and find joy in simple things. Simply spending time with babies and young children can be a gateway into presence if you are willing to relax and embrace the experience without trying to control it. This is a beautiful gift that children can bring into our lives.

It is inevitable that this radiance begins to dim as children grow and their ego develops. Through Eckhart Tolle's writing I learned more about the ego; what it is, how it develops and the suffering it brings. Growing up human involves developing an ego, a sense of being an individual self with a unique and separate body and personality. Taking on the belief that *I am this person* is something we all go through. As young children we develop an idea of ourselves as well as identifications with possessions, opinions, appearances, memories, gender, likes and dislikes and many other things. Along with this developing sense of self come all sorts of problems: upsets and conflict, struggle over toys, snatching,

fighting and frustration at the thought that you are not getting what you want.

I can now view these struggles and problems with greater compassion. I recognise that I have been living with these ego-generated struggles since my own early childhood and am only now finding a way to be free of them. Even though my children's distress sometimes seems petty, insignificant or a complete overreaction from an adult perspective, I can see that it is serious for them. I have come to see things more from my child's point of view. I have also grown in my respect for my children's ability to learn and recover from their distressing experiences and emotions.

My own growing awareness of presence has allowed my ego to begin to dissolve. I can be more available for my children and less in conflict with them. I am more able to notice presence in my children and connect with that even when they are experiencing distress. I can also give more attention to the times when my child is shining brightly with peace and joy. Being able to appreciate their humour, exuberance and delight allows me to share in these qualities too. Finding this deep connection with my children has been a precious gift.

How do I Listen in Presence when my child has a problem?

I have a heartfelt desire to listen respectfully and calmly to my children. I want to relate to them from presence and to be genuinely helpful rather than add to their problems with my own reactions. To do this I needed to take a look at my habits of communication. I made a decision to focus on exactly what was happening in

situations where my children were experiencing difficulties. What had I been saying to my children when they came to me with a problem? What was getting in the way of my listening?

1. Notice how your reactions get in the way

I noticed that when my child was upset I often spoke and acted without pausing, as if I was on automatic pilot. I noticed that I reacted. A lot. By reaction I mean that something arose in me to meet my child's words or actions that was charged with negative emotion. In some situations I was overcome with the same sort of feelings that my child was experiencing. I felt their sadness or disappointment acutely. In other situations my reaction to my child was angry, impatient or dismissive. My reactions were varied, depending on what emotions were triggered in me. Getting caught up in my own negative emotion prevented me from being able to really listen to my children.

Inspiration to improve my listening skills came from the book *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Thomas Gordon. This amazing, groundbreaking book, published in 1970, was introduced to me by my mother. She bought it and used some of his suggestions when I and my siblings were teenagers. It remains a classic that I have read and learned from many times. Thomas Gordon uses an exercise to help parents recognise what kinds of verbal responses they use when their kids come to them with feelings or problems.² I have modified his examples to reflect current issues and language. I found this exercise to be a very helpful tool for raising my awareness of what I was habitually saying to my children. I invite you to try it too.

Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen. Approach this exercise with curiosity. Imagine the following scenarios as if this was your child and you were giving them your first, knee-jerk reaction. Don't think about it or censor yourself. Do not try to be nice or show your best efforts. Try to be honest about what comes out when you are caught up in the challenges of day-to-day parenting. Just write down the first thing that comes into your head.

1. Your ten-year-old daughter says to you:

I don't know what's wrong with me. Sally used to like me, but now she doesn't. She never comes down here to play anymore. And if I go up there she's always talking with Isabelle. I just stand there all by myself. I hate them both.

Write down exactly what you would say if this was your child.

2. Now imagine your seven-year-old son says to you:

How come I can't have a Playstation? All my friends have them! It's not fair! You never get me what I want and I think you are the meanest parents in the world!

Again, write down your immediate reaction.

3. Imagine you have friends around for dinner. Your four-year-old becomes frustrated that he can't get your attention. You are busy talking to your guests and he is pulling on your arm and trying to get you to come into his bedroom. All of a sudden he hits you on the arm and yells loudly *You are a stupid cow! I hate you!*

What do you say?

4. Can you think of a recent instance where your child came to you with upset feelings or a problem? Perhaps you have a toddler who has a tantrum when they get over-stimulated or frustrated or a teenager who is struggling with peer relationships or the burden of homework. What do you say to them? Write it down.

Thomas Gordon lists twelve different categories into which parent's reactions can fall. He calls them the *Typical Twelve*.³ These are listed below (with some adaptation). Take the responses you wrote down on your sheet of paper and try to classify each into whichever category fits your response best. While you do this, you may also like to circle the type of response you are most likely to make when any sort of trouble arises with your children.

- * **Ordering, Directing, Commanding:** *Stop crying, Don't talk to your mother like that! Stop complaining! Just go back and play!*
- * **Warning or threatening:** *If you do that you will be sorry! Say that one more time and you will be sent to your room! If you talk like that about those girls they will never play with you.*
- * **Telling them what they should or should not do:** *You shouldn't act like that. You ought to do this..., You must respect your parents.*
- * **Advising, giving solutions:** *Why don't you ask Sally and Isabelle to play down here? All right! I will buy you one for you next birthday! Why don't you sit down and watch TV?*

- * **Lecturing, teaching:** *Children must learn to get along with one another. You play too many video games already. They are not good for you. If you want our attention you must say excuse me.*
- * **Judging, criticising, disagreeing, blaming:** *You probably aren't being nice enough to those girls. You are such a greedy child! You are so rude!*
- * **Praising, agreeing:** *Well, I think that you are a lovely person. Of course you can have a Playstation. I don't want you to feel left out.*
- * **Name-calling, ridiculing, shaming:** *You're a spoiled brat. You are acting like a wild animal. Okay, little baby.*
- * **Interpreting, analysing, diagnosing:** *You are just jealous of Sally. You must be really tired. Those kids at school must be giving you a hard time.*
- * **Reassuring, sympathising, pitying:** *You will feel better tomorrow. All kids go through this sometime. Don't worry, things will work out. Oh, you poor thing...*
- * **Probing, questioning, interrogating:** *Do the girls ever tell you why they don't want to play with you? How many other kids you know really have a Playstation 3? Who put that idea into you head?*
- * **Withdrawing, distracting, humouring:** *Just forget about it. Come on – lets do something else. Do you want some ice cream? Cheer up. You will get over it.*

I have added a few more to his list:

- * **Manipulating:** *If you are a good boy, I will get you a Playstation for Christmas. You be quiet and let us talk or I won't read you a story tonight.*
- * **Storytelling, switching attention back onto me:** *I used to have that sort of problem with other girls. I found it really hard to make friends....When I was a kid we never had anything like a Playstation and we were much better off for it.*
- * **Ignoring:** *I am not listening to that! Just go away. Don't bother me. I am too busy for this!*

Did you find any of your automatic reactions in the list? I certainly did. I discovered that when one of my children came to me with a problem or was acting out their feelings that I had a deeply entrenched habit of leaping in to try to fix it. I would summon quite a few of these reactions to try to achieve this. I would give advice immediately; I would yell *Just calm down and find another toy to play with!* I would interrogate and diagnose: *What did you say to him?, You must be very tired.* I would tell them what they shouldn't do: *Don't hit him like that!* At times I would manipulate and threaten shamelessly: *If you don't stop that RIGHT NOW then we are not going out to the park at all!* This might be followed by a lecture on how they could handle things better: *For goodness sake! Next time, just ask him for the toy before you just grab it.*

What unities all my reactions and those listed above is that a painful or unpleasant emotion was triggered. My reactions were not calm, helpful suggestions or supportive inquiries. They each

held a negative emotional charge. I found myself feeling either wound up, tight and irritated by my child or feeling sad, disappointed or helpless along with them. At the time I explained my reactions as a simple desire to help my child. The more closely I examined the situation the less this stood up to scrutiny. The fact is, my reactions rarely helped fix my child's problem. My child would inevitably pick up on my anger, frustration or sadness and react to that, just making the whole situation worse.

As I became more aware of my reactions I also realised that there were thoughts associated with my difficult feelings. Underneath each reaction was a thought such as:

- * *He shouldn't be carrying on like this. He is making such a big thing out of nothing!*
- * *I am so embarrassed when he has a tantrum in public. What will those other parents think of me?*
- * *I really need a quiet day today. I can't handle this now!*
- * *It is so unbearably sad when a pet you love dies.*

Noticing the thoughts underneath my reactions has been very important for me. The simple noticing of these thoughts has helped to release their grip on me. I have also learned to question thoughts that bring stress into my life. This skill will be introduced in the next chapter.

My reactions were a bundle of thoughts, feelings, words and actions. I had learned these reactions from things that were said or done to me as a child or that I heard others say or do to their children.

At some point I chose to accept these reactions and the thoughts that came with them into my consciousness even though I was largely unaware of this. These learned or conditioned thoughts turned into beliefs. I built my understanding of the world around these beliefs and I shaped my own communication around them. Like most people, I developed deeply ingrained habits of communicating that flowed directly from my conditioned thoughts. It seemed so normal to speak to children in this way because we share much of our conditioned thinking with our family, friends and community. Our reactions are often so familiar to us that we hardly notice them. They have passed like a virus down the generations and through our social networks.

One of gifts that my children brought into my life was that they challenged me. Their way of being, combined with constant sleep deprivation, sent me into such frequent and extreme reactions that my unconscious habits were brought to my attention. I became aware of the stress, conflict and strain on my relationships that these reactions brought with them. As my awareness grew I began to feel very uncomfortable about my reactions. I was also uncomfortable with the fact that I couldn't seem to stop them. However, judging myself did not help. Being at war with my reactions fed a belief in my own unworthiness and seemed to dig my reactivity in deeper. I had to remind myself repeatedly that the aim of raising my awareness was to bring more peace into my life, not to give myself a hard time. I realised that there are no right and wrong ways of responding to my children, just ways of communicating that increase stress and conflict and ways that bring more peace and harmony.

The process of bringing my attention to my reactions was a powerful way to bring the peace of presence into my life. I deepened my experience of myself as the calm observer of my thoughts and feelings. With practice I found that I was able to hold my own negative thoughts and emotions in awareness without acting on them. As I focused my attention on presence and on listening to my child these thoughts and feelings melted away.

2. Respond by listening

Once I noticed the ways that I reacted when my child had a problem I was more able to consciously choose my response. I chose to form a new habit to replace my old reactivity. I practised responding to my child by listening to them.

To be able to listen in a way that is truly helpful is a skill that most people have to learn. It doesn't often just happen, although some people may be gifted with this ability. This listening arises out of calm state of being that is not cluttered with thoughts and emotions. The most effective way that I know of finding this state of being is to connect with presence. When my child is upset I take a moment to collect myself before I say or do anything. This only takes a few seconds and yet it changes the energy and intent of my listening in a profound way. It is the most useful and life-changing habit I have ever formed. It is not just helpful in situations when my child is distressed. I can use this simple practice whenever my child wants my attention. I also use it when listening to other adults. It not only benefits these relationships, it is a wonderful gift to myself.

I collect myself by pausing and taking a breath. I relax my attention away from my thoughts. I bring my awareness to my inner body and focus on the calm energy I find there. I focus my attention on the present moment, on what is happening right now, rather than on thoughts of the past or future.

I invite you to adapt this practice to suit yourself. You may want to re-read the first part of this chapter and find the way that you most easily connect with presence. It can be something as simple as taking a few seconds to ignore your thoughts and recognise the still, silent presence that is behind them. Explore and practise what feels best for you.

Once I have taken a few seconds to recognise presence I gently turn my attention to listening to my child. I accept that my child is upset and has a problem. If I recognise an impulse to dismiss or fix my child's problem I choose not to act on it. I choose to listen with a fresh and open attitude. I want to provide a loving, respectful space for their distress to be heard. I want to gently embrace my child with my calm, attentive listening. If I notice that stressful thoughts are popping into my head I choose to turn my attention away from them. I know that I can deal with these at another time. If I need to, I take another few seconds to reconnect with presence and find my inner calm.

Presence is a creative state of being. If I immerse myself in the experience of listening in presence I intuitively know what to do. I find a natural and spontaneous way of listening that is responsive to my child and the situation. I know when to stay silent. If it seems appropriate to speak I know what to say. I am able to support my

child rather than react to them. I can support them by quietly listening to them cry or tell me what their problem is, waiting for them to calm down and find their own solution. Sometimes I hold them in a gentle embrace. I do not try to get them to stop crying or distract them from their problem. I create a space in which they can calm down and soothe themselves. If it seems helpful I draw my child into a deeper exploration of their problem using simple questions. Sometimes I offer suggestions about possible solutions making sure that I don't tell them what to do. I might share my own experience with a similar problem (without switching the attention back onto me). A practical solution to my child's problem may appear that resolves the upset: they agree to a suggestion of mine, their sibling gives them back the toy they took or someone else steps in with an idea or a hug. Each child and each situation is unique and the solutions will reflect this.

When my children are very upset they like me to listen in presence and say little or nothing at all. They value the space to cry, complain, blame, express their feelings and generally let it all out. They can say hateful, judgemental things about others or about me, knowing that I will not react with judgement. They can express their feelings openly as I sit with them giving them my full attention. If they ask for help and there is something practical I can do for them I will do it. Often they don't ask. They finish expressing themselves, get up and get on with their lives. They find a way of calming themselves and solving their own problems internally. I can tell that their energy has shifted and that they no longer believe what they had been saying a few moments before. It is wonderful to witness them resolving their own problems in this way. It feels

so clean and respectful. They often get back to playing happily with the very person that they hated just a few minutes before.

The same intention to listen in presence applies if my child is not telling me about their problem, but is “acting out” by hitting, throwing things, screaming or hurting themselves. Listening in presence is a wonderful way to approach a child’s distressed actions and behaviour. For example, some children get so upset that they start screaming and throwing themselves on the floor. They are often unable to tell their parent what the problem is. The intensity of the situation may be heightened for the parent if this is happening in a public place such as a supermarket or playground. Listening in presence is a very effective skill to use in these situations. I first take a moment to collect myself and be clear about my intention. I then focus my attention exclusively on my child rather than on the people or environment around us. I might crouch down to be closer to them, sit on the floor or take them onto my lap. I make eye contact with them if they were willing and perhaps say gently *I see that you are very upset. I am here and I am listening to you.* My presence and the safe space that this creates allows my child to move through their distress, let it go and return to happiness. When they calm down we might talk about their problem but this is not always helpful.

When a child is expressing their distress through acting out, listening in presence can be supplemented with action, particularly if the child could hurt someone. For example, I have deflected blows while I am listening. I have also moved in and gently restrained a child from hitting or hurting someone else. I have taken a potential weapon out of my child’s hand. These are quick, intuitive actions.

They differ in quality from the automatic reactions of the past. They have no negative emotional charge and are not accompanied by judgement or anger.

Sometimes I have even managed to turn my child's distressed actions into the start of a game. For example, if they are lashing out at me in anger or frustration I might feign my own injury or terror. Playfully acting as if I have been hurt, offended or scared by their actions can sometimes shift the energy of the moment in a helpful way that allows the problem to dissolve or the child to move from expressing anger to feeling the hurt that lies underneath it. The lashing out may dissolve into tears and a desire for a hug. This playful response is not always helpful, especially if a child feels they are being made fun of, but I am guided by my intuition as to how and when it might help. I have also picked up some tips from Lawrence Cohen in his wonderful book *Playful Parenting*. He describes how parents can use play in this way to help reestablish a connection with their child.⁴ Skill 5 introduces more detail about using play as a way of helping children with their problems .

I was given some very loud and dramatic invitations to listen in presence before I got the hang of it. Listening to intense emotional expression and physical acting-out was a big challenge for me. Eventually I realised that what was required from me in these situations was a state of intense presence that matched the intensity of my child's distress. I focused intense attention on my own inner body, drawing attention away from my mind. In doing this, I turned up the volume of my awareness and presence. It was a way of putting myself on high alert (but not the fear-induced kind). I

was drawing on inner resources that felt infinitely more powerful, loving and wise than my old, conditioned thoughts and reactions. I found that I could hold my attention on my inner body and on my child at the same time. I could listen until the rage or fear or frustration subsided and my child was ready to have a cuddle and fully calm down. I could also do what was necessary to look after both of us so that no one got hurt.

Through listening to my children more deeply I discovered new ways to help them get what they wanted and create an environment where upsets were less likely to occur. This included giving them greater autonomy in their daily lives and treating them with more respect. I became more aware of the type of situations that triggered intense reactions in my children and acted to avoid these when possible. Ultimately, I realised that these expressions of intense emotion were an amazing gift for me. They were an experience of fierce grace that woke me up to presence and a new way of being.

Knowing how to listen in presence doesn't mean that I never react or communicate out of habit when my children have problems. I still sometimes get angry or frustrated or leap in and try to fix things. What has changed is that now I notice quickly when I react in this way and can gently pull myself up before I get totally carried away. I know that my reaction and my feelings of irritation, fear or pity are an alarm that tells me that I have lost presence and that I am trapped in my own stressful thoughts. The moment I notice this the awareness of presence comes back. This creates a space in which I can make a choice about how I communicate.

I usually apologise to my child if my reaction was unkind or unhelpful and start again. This has been a liberating experience for me. I have apologised many, many times. I have found my children to be very forgiving and it has always brought us closer together.

There is no formula for listening in presence. To create one would rob it of its natural spontaneity. However, as I was learning this skill I found it useful to have some ideas of what to say instead of my normal reactive statements. These ideas helped to fill a gap while I was unlearning my conditioned reactions and deepening my experience of presence. It was great to have something to get me started with a new way of communicating with my children. I found the skills presented by Thomas Gordon in *Parent Effectiveness Training*⁵ and Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*⁶ to be particularly helpful. I have taken what was most useful to me from these writers and I give some examples below.

3. Simple door-openers

If you want to practise listening to your children in a new way try using a simple “door-opener.” These are responses that invite your child to talk or to just continue to cry if that is what they need. They can be very useful if your child is reluctant to talk or is used to being shut down by your reactions. The simplest of these can be:

- * *I see.*
- * *Oh.*
- * *That's interesting.*
- * *I understand.*
- * *I am sorry that you are so upset.*

Or they can be something more like an invitation:

- * *Tell me about it.*
- * *Would you like to talk about that?*
- * *This seems to be important to you.*⁷

For young children this type of invitation seems to work better than a direct question such as *What is wrong?* or *Why are you crying?* Perhaps this is because young children may not have enough self-awareness to answer these questions. They might not know what is wrong or they might not be able to put it into words. There is also the possibility that a more direct question may put a child on the defensive or be interpreted as an accusation that something must be wrong with them for them to be so upset.

4. Active listening

A technique that really helped me to dissolve my old habits of communicating is active listening. Active listening is particularly helpful when children really want to talk about their problems. The key to active listening is to listen to the feelings and wants underneath what is being said by my child rather than the words that they actually used. This understanding can then be reflected back to them. It gave me a way of demonstrating to my child that I was listening as I reflected back to them what they were feeling and/or wanting. They felt heard by me and this created a space in which they could express their feelings more fully.

Here are some examples of active listening:

Child: *I really have a terrible teacher this year. I don't like her. She is a real old grouch.*

Parent: *Sounds like you are really disappointed with your teacher.*

Child: *I sure am. I hate the way she yells at us.*

Parent: *You would like her to talk more gently?*

Child: *YES!! She is so loud and grumpy that it hurts my ears!*

Or

Child: (crying) *Jimmy took my truck away from me. I hate him!*

Parent: *You are really upset and angry about that. You want your truck back.*

Child: (crying even more) *I want my truck back!!!*

It often helps if I reflect back to my child as a question. This is because we often make assumptions about what we hear. If I reflect back in my own words what I think my child is feeling and wanting then they have an opportunity to correct me if I have misunderstood:

Child: *You don't care about me!*

Parent: *Are you feeling hurt because you want me to notice how upset you are?*

Or

Child: *Daddy's coming! I don't want him to see me! He is nasty and evil!*

Parent: *Are you feeling scared because you think that Daddy is angry with you?*

If I tune in to the feelings and wants that my child is expressing rather than what they are saying, I am less likely to blame myself by taking the message personally, or to blame and judge them.⁸ Practising this technique has been so liberating for me. My child

may be saying all sorts of hateful things about me or someone else and I can simply listen for what they are feeling. I can say, *You are angry with me* or *I understand that you are frustrated*, instead of reacting. I don't judge the words spoken by my child because I can see that the words are simply an expression of emotional suffering.

Active listening encourages children to express themselves more fully so, initially, I might find my child getting more upset, rather than less, as they give full vent to their feelings. It can bring on crying and other physical expressions of emotion. They might start hitting out or throwing things, for example. If I listen in presence and take steps to keep everybody safe this becomes a healing opportunity for my child. Once they have expressed their stuck emotion they calm down and move on with no residue of difficult feelings.

If my child responds well to active listening I keep using it at intervals while they speak to me about their problem. This can help them get to the heart of what is really bothering them. I have found that the real issue is often something quite different from the one that my child started talking about. Many times there was a deeper hurt underneath the initial problem. There may also be underlying fears that my child has difficulty dealing with. Creating a space of acceptance and non-judgemental listening can help bring these deep fears into the light.

Here is an example of how active listening can help a child find a solution to their problem. In one of the scenarios given above a ten-year-old was saying:

I don't know what's wrong with me. Sally used to like me, but now she doesn't. She never comes down here to play anymore. If I go up there she's always talking with Isabelle. I just stand there all by myself. I hate them both.

This is how the interaction could go if the parent was using active listening:

Parent: *I see! You're feeling sad and disappointed that Sally doesn't want to play with you.*

Child: *Yes! Sally was my friend and now she just likes Isabelle! (Crying...) I want Sally to play with me again!!*

Parent: *Are you feeling sad because things have changed? Would you like things to be the way they were with Sally and you?*

Child: *I would!! (still crying...) But she's changed too. I don't know if I even like her any more!*

Parent: *She has changed a bit?*

Child: *Yes! She is only interested in talking about clothes now. And I think that is SO boring! I don't want to talk about boring clothes all day!*

Parent: *Sounds like you are frustrated because you want somebody to play the way you like to and Sally doesn't want to do that now.*

Child: *Yes. (long pause...) Maybe I could ask Penny over to play. She is much more fun.*

Of course, things don't always resolve that easily. Sometimes a child will be left with a problem that they can't resolve easily on their own.

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